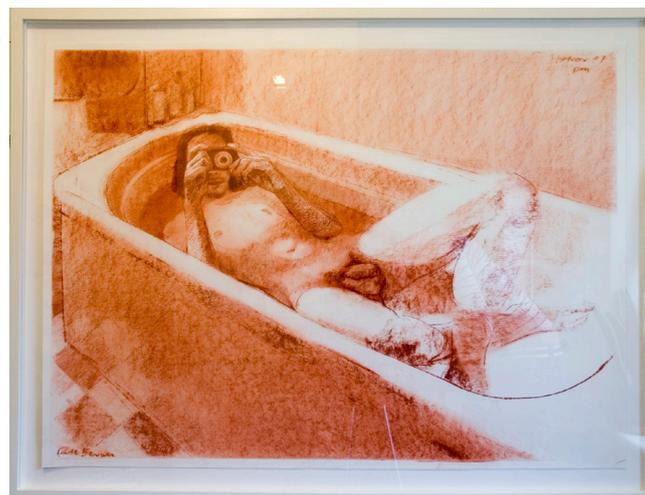


A Body of Relations: Reconfiguring the Life Class

An analysis of *Study of Nude in Bath* and *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath)*

Yuen Fong Ling



On the morning of the 1 November 2007 in a flat in Glasgow, two artists discuss the production of two drawings from a life model. As one prepares an easel, board, paper and chalk pastels, the other undresses, fills a bath with water and checks on his digital camera. In doing so, each artist prepares to make a work. In these preparatory stages, a theoretical split occurs between the two artists as they each act out the roles of artist and model. In the direction of the artist's gaze, the artist employs the model to produce a life drawing. Yet in this instance, the model returns the gaze, as the model employs the artist to produce a life drawing. Now the model as active performer has usurped the role of artist as producer of the life drawing.

This sets the scene for the now titled work *Study of Nude in Bath*, here the model's gaze signifies a pro-active, self-conscious engagement with the representational agendas of life drawing; emanating from the life model, the gaze suggests a play with the hierarchies of power. This means, first, confronting the artist's gaze, charged with the objectification, classification, and stereotyping of life models. Secondly, it means re-assessing the model's gaze, establishing the role of model as performer, the event as performance, and hence the artist as co-opted into documenting this event. Thirdly, I will argue, the potential of the life drawing as performance document subject to the re-appraisal of the artist's and the model's gaze.

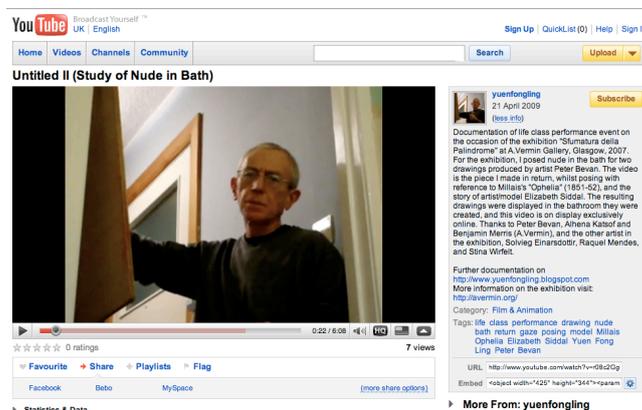
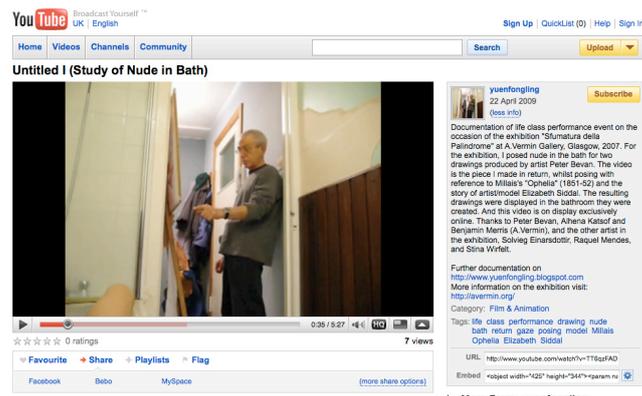
Confronting the Gaze

In my analysis of the work of art, I will follow the reference made to *Ophelia* (1851–52) by John Everett Millais.¹ This painting is linked with the story of the life model Elizabeth Siddal; it is said that Siddal lay in a bathtub heated with candles, yet when these candles expired, doing her best to remain in character, she contracted pneumonia and never fully recovered. During the painting's production Millais made very few preparatory studies.² These drawings give no visual suggestion of the arduous circumstances of Siddal's modelling experience. Although there are verbal accounts from other artists and family members, the visual mythology of Siddal in the bath is constructed from hearsay and the rhetoric of art historical discourse surrounding it. This provides a disjunctive gap for the transposing of Siddal's body for that of another, in this instance my own, posing as a life model in the work *Study of Nude in Bath*, into myth.

Further research revealed Siddal was an artist in her own right, and her relationship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti was both pleasure and business. Siddal and Rossetti developed a creative partnership that produced a number of studies that illuminate the nature of their relationship. Two main types of drawing made during this period emerge; one shows Siddal as the passive, sickly, romantic muse she embodied as *Ophelia*, seen in *Elizabeth Siddal Asleep* (1854) and the other shows the active, attentive, studious artist at work, as in *Elizabeth Siddal Painting at an Easel* (1850s).³ The veracity in which these drawings are interpreted as representational 'fact' depicting Siddal's persona, splinters the biographical facts. Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock suggest such drawings are self-conscious constructions that work to address the mores of gender and social divisions 'between a bourgeois male artist and a female working class model'.⁴ Hence, these drawings function like tabloid newspaper photographs; on the one hand, displaying an image of authenticity and truth, on the other, possessing the potential for manipulation and falsehood.

Cherry and Pollock develop this argument in the discursive gap between the visual signifiers of Siddal and the rhetoric of certain art historians. They write: 'What is denied the drawing in this process is their status as work, as being worked, the product of history and ideology'.⁵ Rossetti's drawings, written about by the art historian, reinforced by a patriarchal society that privileges the artist's gaze as dominant over what is looked at and interpreted by the reader, create the cumulative effects that maintain the fictional status of Siddal. For Cherry and Pollock, 'art history is a field invested with power, and [...] the production of knowledge is historically shaped within relations of power'.⁶ Moreover, to make the artwork as the model is to enter into this 'field'. In my attempt to recreate what is known of Siddal's experience as a play of power relations, I do this knowingly. Although gender differences have maintained the model as subordinate to the dominant male artist paradigm, these images have been instrumental to empowering a feminist discourse reinstating Siddal's artistic contribution. This supports the notion that she actively operates within these structures of power, participates in and negotiates these challenges, in keeping with Siddal, the artist-as-model. Although Rossetti is author of these drawings, they become co-dependently performative, illustrating Siddal's intention to become the artist, making the image in effect co-authored. They offer a counterpoint to the stereotypical readings that have defined her popularity as the artistic muse of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In which romantic tropes of a heartbroken grief-stricken heroine, as depicted in her role in *Ophelia*, is intertwined into the stories of her relationship with Rossetti. Yet what is proposed by these drawings is a claim for recognition by a determined and ambitious female artist. This interpretive gap also allows me a point of reflection, to question if the model can disrupt these power relations while operating within them.

Re-assessing the Model's Gaze



To establish the role of model as performer, the event as performance, and hence the artist co-opted into documenting this event, *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath) I and II* (2009)⁷ makes a critical response to the initial work *Study of Nude in Bath* (2007). Here, as the artist-as-model, my image is embedded in the two drawings. Armed with a digital camera, I am depicted producing two short digital video clips, one for each drawing, now only accessible on the website YouTube. This work counteracts the practice of life drawing in *Study of Nude in Bath* with two digital video clips showing the now co-opted artist at work. He is seen staring, glancing, looking, and not looking, between the drawing and my performance. Yet the artist, Peter Bevan, is now subjected to my observation and scrutiny, and subsequently yours. In fact anyone searching the website with key words such as 'nude', 'bath', 'life model', 'Siddal', 'Ophelia', 'posing', 'performance', and 'drawing' can find the artwork, albeit amidst an array of home movies, reality television, amateur/student film, comedy sketches, and even soft porn.

The work signals the beginning of a counter-activity altering my role and status as model. Once represented as self-aware with the means to self-reflect, a challenge is presented through my attempt to achieve a parity of experience, that asks who is the object of investigation by considering the role of the model with the camera and the artist with the drawing. By re-assessing the model's gaze, a series of 'returns' are activated that address the life drawing, the artist who draws the life drawing, and the site of production. The key theoretical positions that support the notion of the artist-as-model consider the separation between the artist and the art object. Amelia Jones offers a historical account termed the 'Pollockian performative'.⁸ Jones describes how the photographs by Hans Namuth for *Life Magazine* in 1950s had given rise to an international response by artists to the effects of seeing the artist Jackson Pollock at work in his studio. These now iconic images present Pollock's paintings as inherently about the artist's body: how his body performs, how the paintings are made up of actions and the act of painting. Moreover, how the position and scale of his paintings, when exhibited, produce a type of spectacle that draws the viewer into the space of the canvas. What Allan Kaprow describes as 'environments',⁹ that effectively allow viewers to act

out Pollock's bodily relationship to the painting.

Jones explores this further, in Yves Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960) at the Galerie internationale d'art contemporain, where artistic production becomes a theatrical performance. Klein addresses a live audience, conducts a small group of orchestral musicians, and instructs a number of nude female models who paint themselves and imprint their bodies onto canvas panels that form the stage and backdrop. Photographed by Harry Shunk, Klein is seen directing, using gestures of his hands and body, conscious not to touch or interact physically with other performers, separating artistic labour from his own body. In this self-conscious play, what Jones describes as 'intersubjective' (where the artist performs or enacts in relation to others),¹⁰ he transforms the reading of Pollock's earnest, workingclass, American performativity into an ironic, aristocratic, European performance. Therefore the 'Pollockian performative' signals the transformation of the artist into a performer in the work of art. In doing so, this transgresses of masculine ideals embodied by the male artist. In contrast to Klein's wry and knowingly dehumanising use of the nude model as 'tool' or even 'material', in *Study of Nude in Bath* it is I who disrobe, abandoning the costume of the artist and the gestures of artistic production for those of the 'object'. As such, I am left with the question: if I am to be the seemingly passive self-aware model, how do I go about making the 'material' work of art.

Study of Nude in Bath and *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath)* require a doubling of roles, where the co-opted artist supplies those skills attributed to the artist; the maker of the traces of performance, the hand closest to the art object. Therefore, my 'intersubjective' position is one of model, artist, performer, documenter, director, producer, passive and active, object and subject. In addition, these positions implicate the co-opted artist through the production and reading of the life drawings and digital video clips. Even though both these forms of art making are materially opposed, I would like to explore their commonalities and how they operate as works of art.

Life Drawing as Performance Document

Having first confronted the gaze as being invested in the discourse of power affecting the model, and secondly established a performative split between the artist and material art object – and therefore my shifting position as the self-aware artist-as-model – I will explore the central role of the life drawing in this theoretical split and how its ideological function can be contested by the return of the model's gaze.

The separation between artist and art object, in the instances of Pollock and Klein, is developed by conflicting discourses, from photography and text. The production and interpretation of photographic documentation is key to how we know these events as being works of art. As a result, the photographs of Hans Namuth and Harry Shunk inform the co-dependent relationship between what we now know as 'performance art' practice and its 'documentation'. Lucy Lippard termed this the 'dematerialisation of the art object'.¹¹ This suggests the action and/or gesture of the artist as primary and the art object as secondary. This art object records the performativity of the artist, deploying readily available forms of media like photography and video technology as if objective tools of scientific study. In both works, *Study of Nude in Bath* and *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath)*, the status of the life drawings versus the digital video clips signifies the trajectories of opposing processes, one material and the other dematerial, as if a cross fire of stares and counter glances, chalk pastels and digital cameras at dawn. This framework of performativity, production and labour carefully hangs in the balance as to what logical conclusion does the 'dematerialising' process may lead.

Peggy Phelan argues that the essence of performance is in its originating presentation. Inherently it can never be repeated, even by the same artist, and politically resistant to art as capital, it should not enter into the 'economy of reproduction'.¹² In addition, Phelan highlights performance's 'being' fundamentally reveals the 'disappearance' of the artist, therefore problematising the performance document as 'only a spur to memory'; the supplementary nature of documentation to the artist that is no longer present.¹³ My art practice does not solely enter into performance as the central aspect of the work; rather, it does so as a consequence of dealing with the performativity of representation. Hence, I find significance in the 'disappearance' of the artist through the body's reproduction. In

a shift of performance's ontological essence, my practice explores the notion that one performs in order to 'disappear'; to make complex the reading of the performance document, and in effect, by re-appraising Lippard's term and Phelan's ideology, 're-materialise' the art object to enter into and disrupt the discourse of power over the visual representations of the model.

The drawing is at the material centre of this reconfiguring of the practice of life drawing from the model. Its production is enforced by a 'play to camera'; whilst one makes an image, one becomes an image. Philip Auslander asserts that performance documentation has two types that he describes as 1) 'theatrical', staged directly for the camera, or 2) 'documentary', staged for an audience and then the camera.¹⁴ These types operate between the realms of fine art and the subjective work of art, where it is commonplace to actively construct and manipulate meaning, and the ethnographic study of recording the event, supporting the loose interpretation and paraphrasing of those being studied. Auslander suggests that the reality of the documentary type functions as performative as well as describing the performance. He writes:

the act of documenting an event as performance is what constitutes it as such [...] documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurs: it produces an event as a performance [...] and a performer as artist.¹⁵

However, Auslander argues the 'theatrical' type is often conducted in controlled and complicit environments between the artist and the photographer; for example, Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* (1960), a deceptive photomontage that shows the artist jumping from his studio window into the street below. Klein's work suggests a subjective tendency more in keeping with the practice of drawing and painting, or as Auslander describes it, 'the reproduction of works'.¹⁶ This mode of document intentionally disrupts the ethnographic reality of 'the capturing of events'¹⁷ and also questions whether one has ever existed. Such documents infringe on the documentary type through its circulation within the discourse of the artist's practice. With *Leap into the Void*, Klein distributed his own fake newspaper, *Dimanche*, containing the photograph, to Parisian newsstands to commemorate the 'event'. Therefore, this 'theatrical' type of performance documentation begins to align itself to the life drawings in *Study of Nude in Bath*, as an inherently shaped and self-consciously manipulated document of the artist-as-model. Furthermore, the discursive function of Klein's newspaper establishes the event as a performance, or in actuality, the fictional event of the artist's performativity.

This discursive element of the performance document establishes a parallel with life drawing. In view of Auslander's argument that performance documentation constitutes the event as performance and performer as artist, the life drawing constitutes the performance of the model and the role of artist-as-model. A drawing of such nature declares the performativity of not only the artist but by proxy the model. Furthermore, central to the evolution of the performance document is the function of discourse in shaping the fidelity to the performance and the artist. The discursive aspects of image and text and its circulation in structures of knowledge uphold the authenticity of the performance document. In simple terms, it is the framework of discourse that makes the life drawing a performance document. Hence, the now artist-as-model and co-opted artist embody the discursive roles and acts that function in the work *Study of Nude in Bath*. They are co-dependant, co-authored signifiers of authenticating discourse.

To illustrate this, in John Baldessari's *Police Drawing* (1971), the artist, at the time unknown to a new group of students, sets up an easel, board, video and lighting and then leaves the classroom.¹⁸ A police artist from the San Diego California Police Department enters, introduces himself, and asks the students to describe the artist. Together they attempt to draw a likeness. Baldessari builds into the sequence of this performance the co-opted police artist as signifier of a 'drawing truth', as one might assume is possessed by the authority and authentication of a courtroom artist drawing.

In Roman Ondak's *I'm just acting in it* (2007), the artist uses the structure of the institutional museum, co-opting curators, gallery educators, and the general public.¹⁹ A fiction of the artist is generated based on a presentation of a series of life drawings, made by the public without the physical presence of the artist-as-model. A simple instruction to draw the artist was given to the public, yet it was derived from a description of the artist by the curators of the exhibition constructed from

a photograph and the curator's memory. Ondák reflects the system of museological value that authenticates the work of art in the gallery, and uses it to 're-materialise' his image, while declaring he is merely a performer in the artwork; more so, an idea of a performer in the work.

The implications of these various tactical positions adopted by artists towards the use of the life drawing as performative and constituting the performance of the artist, enable *Study of Nude in Bath* and *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath)* to distribute the performance document in the context of a range of interpretive possibilities. Although one is more readily available than the other, should anyone wish to search on the internet, the work remains as allusive as the life drawings. It functions on the premise that if online, one has presence; however, contradictory presence equates absence in the oversaturated wealth of information on the internet. Therefore, the co-opted artist's online presence suggests that the performance of the model 'happened' while representing the openly interpretive and potentially inauthentic discursive framework it functions in.²⁰

The life drawings by Peter Bevan and the digital video clips of Peter Bevan circulate in two contrasting realms of encountering the work; gallery and digital screen, material and immaterial, yet they co-exist in order to authenticate each other. One gaze effectively upholds the other in performance documentation. However, if one considers the alternative ways in which the works are made, technology allows the gaze to easily exist without the other. For example, a drawing made by the artist of a digital camera on the side of a bathtub suggest the digital video clips of the artist can be made without the need of the model, and a digital photograph made by the model in the bath using a mirror and then used to make a replica drawing, suggest the initial life drawings of the model can be made without the need of the artist. And for reasons to defy the narrative of this argument, do they actually exist in a dusty portfolio case hidden from sight? Whether or not the event I described at the beginning of this essay actually took place, 'authenticity' fluctuates in the interpretive gap in which the viewer considers the life drawings as comparable evidence to the digital video clips. And in addition, where fact is premised on how the framework of discourse constructs a system of belief, such as this essay that has supported the notion of a new function for the life drawing that embraces a contingency of meaning towards what we know of the event and its reproduction. Therefore, if the event did take place, in view of the works as undiscovered studies of Millais' *Ophelia*, this reality is a work of fiction.

NOTES

1. An overview of the production of *Ophelia* can be viewed on the Tate Learn Online website *Work in Focus: Millais's Ophelia 1851–52* <<https://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/>> [accessed 9 November 2010]
 2. A number of preparatory sketches for *Ophelia* by Millais can be viewed at <https://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/working_sketches.htm> [accessed 9 November 2010]
 3. Virginia Surtees, *Rossetti's Portraits of Elizabeth Siddal: A Catalogue of the Drawings and Watercolours*, Aldershot: Scolar, 1991.
 4. Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, *Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddal*, London: Art History, 1984, pp. 216–217.
 5. Cherry and Pollock, *Woman as Sign*, p. 223.
 6. Cherry and Pollock, *Woman as Sign*, p. 224.
 7. The works *Untitled (Study of Nude in Bath) I and II* can be viewed via the website *YouTube*: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TT6qzFADXR8>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r08c2GgbGRc>> [accessed 9 November 2010].
 8. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 53–102.
 9. Allan Kaprow, 'The Legend of Jackson Pollock', *Art News*, vol. 57, no. 6, October 1958, p. 24.
 10. Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p. 86.
 11. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 5–9.
 12. Peggy Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction', in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 146.
 13. Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance', p. 146.
 14. Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', *A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 28, no. 23, 2006, p. 1.
 15. Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', p. 5.
 16. Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', p. 6.
 17. Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', p. 6.
 18. John Baldessari's *Police Drawing* (1971), was conducted at the California Institute of Art, Valencia, California. The documentation consists of a framed conté crayon drawing, mounted black and white photographs, and a 23:09 minute video.
 19. The resulting drawings from Roman Ondák, *I'm just acting in it* (2007) featured in the exhibition *The World as a Stage* at Tate Modern, London, 10 October to 20 January 2007. A short video describing the process can be viewed online at Tate Channel <<http://channel.tate.org.uk/channel#media:/media/33797588001&context:/channel/search?searchQuery=roman+ondak>> [accessed on 9 November 2010]
- Peter Bevan is a retired lecturer of the Glasgow School of Art and a visiting life class tutor at The Prince's Drawing School London. His early training at the Gloucestershire College of Art in the late 1960s, and the Royal College London in the 1970s, established his interests in drawing and sculpting from the model. Bevan now makes drawings and sculptures concerning the representation of historical personages, whether fictional or non-fictional subjects, and the nature of visual conjecture. For the works, Bevan signifies the rigorous training of an eye, the dexterity of a hand, the experience of the art tutor and the practice of an artist... skills I have yet to master. <<http://www.colourpointdesign.co.uk/petebevan/biography.htm>> [accessed 9 November 2010]